

Why aren't we more like them? Reflections on the German picture of education in the Nordic countries

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1 Book review on

1. Jukka Sarjala/Esko Häkli (Hrsg.): *Jenseits von PISA. Finnlands Schulsystem und seine neuesten Entwicklungen*. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag 2008. 219 S. ISBN 978-3-8305-1251-6. Preis: 25,-€.
2. Johannes Möhler: *Schule der Zukunft? Vision und Realität der schwedischen Skola 2000*. Münster: Waxmann 2008. 88 S. ISBN 978-3830918400. Preis: 19,90€.
3. Katrin Höhmann/Rainer Kopp/Heidemarie Schäfers/Marianne Demmer (Hrsg.) (2009): *Lernen über Grenzen. Auf dem Weg zu einer Lernkultur, die vom Individuum ausgeht*. Opladen: Barbara Budrich 2009. 250 S. ISBN 978-3-86649-221-9. Preis: 24,90€.
4. Ville Heinonen: *Porträt Weiterbildung Finnland*. Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann 2007. 76 S. ISBN 978-3-7639-1936-9. Preis: 12,90€.
5. J. Hautamäki et al.: *PISA 2006 Finland. Analyses, Reflections, Explanations*. Helsinki: Finnish Ministry of Education 2008. 240 pp. URL: <http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2008/liitteet/opm44.pdf>

From a Nordic perspective it is hard to understand the German fascination with Scandinavian educational arrangements. For most Scandinavians, but not for the Finns, the educational system is a source of worry more than pride – a rigid system with big costs and mediocre results. For many Germans, however, the Nordic countries have long been

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models for political and educational reform. Their fascination was further fuelled by the excellent results of the Nordic countries in the first PISA study. What followed was educational tourism and the use of ‘the Scandinavian argument’ in the German discussion what to do after the ‘PISA-Schock’. One could say that at least the Finns have solved big problems unsolved at home: Finland has a strong top group of high-achieving students and only a small group of students not reaching minimum standards. In addition to that, the Finns also have much more educational equality (when looking at the age group of 15-year-olds).

But how did they do that? In this review, we will ask two main questions: What does school education in Scandinavia and Finland look like from the outside and from the inside? And what explanations for the success stories of the Nordic countries are given? In the end, we will briefly discuss the results of our review.

Sarjala/Häkli, *Jenseits von PISA*. This book is written especially for Germans, and it provides a fair picture of what Finnish authors see as the reasons for their outstanding achievements. It consists of stories: a story of Finnish school history, a story of the use of libraries in Finnish schools, etc. This arouses the reader’s interest, but reading stories is not without problems; the underlying principles which make the story work are woven into the fabric of history, and empirical facts appear at random and without comparative scope. In spite of that, our central theme came to the foreground across the different stories: *Why are Finnish schools performing so well?* Here is what we found out:

There is no doubt that Finnish schools are good. Measured on the PISA tests, the Finnish 9th graders perform outstandingly well, more than one standard deviation above the OECD mean; and they perform well in different subjects; their performance is equitable, and the dispersion within the cohorts is smaller than OECD average. The equitability also holds true in the sense that there is little dispersion between schools from the point of view of socioeconomic differences. In addition to that, the outstanding results come in a setting where the pupils are not taught more than pupils of other OECD countries: In mathematics, they are taught 4.5 lessons per week. Besides, they do not work too much at home: the amount of time spent on schooling is below OECD average.

The broad picture given is that Finnish schools seem to be rooted in the Nordic egalitarian tradition: Nearly all children go to Kindergartens, they receive a comprehensive nine year basic education and a three year upper secondary stage education. It is interesting in this context that the Finns were late adopters of the comprehensive school model: it was not introduced until 1970/72, and it was named basic school. The nine school years – from age group 7 to age group 16 – are to be provided free of charge. Today, some 38% of the students go on to vocational tracks in secondary education, 54% go to general tracks – in line with other Nordic countries. Only 5% of the comprehensive school population opt out of school after 9 years.

The governance of schools seems to make a difference. Finnish schools are run by local authorities, but they are regulated on a national basis. The local authorities have comparatively great autonomy in shaping the organization of the local school system, and probably schools also have greater autonomy in the execution of their work. An example for that can be seen in the fact that evaluation is carried out independently from the Finnish education ministry, and that the Finns have done away with inspectorates. It is also

noteworthy that, since 1970, the national curriculum has been revised four times, the last time in 2004, and that each school is required to write their own school curriculum within the framing set by the national curriculum. This may be seen as somewhat unique even within the Nordic context: Schools are kept on their toes as to what values they stand for and what content is relevant.

A cultural phenomenon the authors take pride in presenting is that the Finns are avid readers. 45% of the Finnish population visit libraries each year, and they go there 12,8 times a year, as an average, borrowing 21 books each person per year. On the other hand, Finnish schools do not have school libraries: The public libraries are for all people, pupils included.

The choice of school subjects is similar to most European countries, with the exception that the Finns have Swedish as their first foreign language, due to the fact that 5% of the population have Swedish as their mother tongue. English is introduced in the 3rd grade. The curriculum includes physical training as well as “sloyd” i.e. practical and aesthetic subjects. The authors put special emphasis on the quality of teacher education and on the good societal status of teachers. Another factor is the organisation of special educational programmes: 15% of the students take part in support teaching (“Förderunterricht”), and some 7% take part in special needs education programmes (“Sonderunterricht”), partly in and out of class or in special classes. There are additional educational institutions: arts training outside of the basic schools and, of course, continuing education.

Summing up, we found that an advantage of Sarjala’s and Häkli’s book is the *broad picture* it presents. The weakness of the book lies in its premises: The authors know that they write a success story, and this prompts the readers’ deconstructive reservation. The authors show that equity of educational opportunity is well entrenched as the educational ideal. But sorting the arguments, we do not find structural information *explaining* the good PISA results of the Finnish students. And we still wonder what “Jenseits von PISA” is meant to mean.¹

Möhler, Schule der Zukunft. The subject of this small book is a presentation and a critical assessment of an educational movement, Skola 2000, introduced within the framework of the Swedish national curriculum. Möhler’s book is published as part of the book series “Erlanger Beiträge zur Pädagogik” and can be read as a token of what is thought valuable to publish from educational researchers in Erlangen, as a German context.

Skola 2000 is a reform movement with considerable influence in Sweden and even some in Norway and Denmark. To call it a “reform movement” may, however, be misleading, since it is a network of people working to change education from within the established school system, in which all schools are subject to national tests, and all schools must describe their development and results to the local authorities each year, says a national standard.

Skola 2000 can be understood as a revitalisation of the progressive movement, focusing on three tenets: Firstly, the schools’ *architecture* must be adapted to the situation of young people learning and to their needs. Regular classrooms suppress these needs. Secondly, *the teaching must be changed* so that the pupils and their individual learning needs come into focus, demanding a change in working methods both by teachers and pupils. And thirdly, pupils must be *prepared for tomorrow’s workplace conditions*. They

have to learn to work with computers, to innovate, to take responsibility and to think holistically.

Möhler gives a very clear and concise presentation of the main tenets of Skola 2000 and presents two schools as examples of how teaching can be rearranged. He is clear when he discusses the relevance of this reform movement for Germany as well: Elements (large or small) of the Skola 2000 vision can be implemented regardless of structure. However, we get the impression that the author takes the motives and forms of change introduced by the schools belonging to the Skola 2000 movement at face value, and this may be the reason why we get the feeling that the presentation of the results of the reform is insufficient; informational fragments like 90% of parents supporting the change, or only 19% of the pupils not interested in going to school after exposure to the Skola 2000 ideas, open up for doubt. Informational gaps, on the other hand, are obvious. For example, we do not know whether the Skola 2000 pupils learn as much as other pupils do.

The lack of systematic assessment of the change Skola 2000 has brought forth, and the lack of grounded generalizations can best be put into the form of a comparative metaphor: Why should plants growing up in a specific climate, like Skola 2000, help a horticulture to be bred in another climate? Are schools places which allow to import good ideas from all over the world and thus improve one's local results? Or is educational quality necessarily embedded, has it grown over centuries, and is it intrinsically linked to the society it is part of? It should be clear by now that we assume that importing good ideas is a very difficult and demanding endeavour!

Höhmnn et al., Lernen über Grenzen. This is a book about a European Comenius project that was undertaken in the years 2003 to 2006. Its aim was to find out how schools in different countries manage to meet the diversity of demands of their learners and how they deal with the concept of individualized learning.

How did they proceed? Sixteen participants from England, Finland, Germany, Norway and Sweden – teachers and teacher educators – collected information on classroom teaching and interviewed teachers, principals and students in secondary schools. They did their work in teams so that four bi-national pairs – i.e. always an insider and an outsider – visited schools 1 and 2, the other four pairs visited schools 3 and 4, for a week. After that, the visitors discussed their observations and findings and wrote reports (case studies).

Each of the partners selected four schools in their own region (Finland: the Jyväskylä area, Norway: the Halden area, Sweden: around Borås), which means that there was no systematic sampling process and this then means that the findings cannot be said to be representative for the learning culture in those countries. To be sure, this was not planned, but it should be kept in mind when reading the book: The visitors were looking for best practice examples in the teaching of heterogeneous classes.

Language problems prevented some of the visitors from listening in to the classroom communication, so that they had to restrict themselves to nonverbal communication in some cases (p. 22). Nevertheless, the project seems exciting enough to stir the reader's interest and the book can be recommended for reading. First, the mix of observers from different national cultures sounds promising and interesting. Second, it provides answers concerning the hotly debated question *what exactly makes the Scandinavians succeed* in terms of school education.

Before answering that question, the structure of the publication should be described briefly. It is divided into three main parts. The *first main part*, 'Grundlagen klären', starts with an introduction to the project and an overview of the available material (five DVDs, a website, modules for teacher education, other publications). This is followed by articles on the concept of heterogeneity, a summary on project findings and a plea for a culture of trust and respect ('Vertrauenskultur') in Germany. The *second main part*, 'Blick über den Zaun', contains the findings from the school visits in England, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Germany (Northrhine-Westphalia). In the *third main part*, 'Praxis konkret', the authors focus on particular aspects such as inclusion, migration, teacher cooperation and teacher education.

What then are the results presented for the Scandinavian schools and how do the authors explain the Scandinavian success story? The first – surprising? – result is that no 'secret teaching formula' could be discovered. More often than not, visitors saw quite conventional teaching (pp. 51, 101, 113, 134). Instead, they identified other reasons for success. They noted, for example, good teacher cooperation, additional staff, additional rooms, all-day schooling, a working atmosphere that was both relaxed and concentrated, and, again and again, a culture of trust and respect. They praised the attitude and mindset of the teachers – focussing on the children and their best, not on tests, grades or subject matter. The reader gets the impression that the observers liked the Swedish system with its special emphasis on autonomous learning best.

So what is there to learn for the Germans? It seems – once again – that only a radical reform that involves many different aspects – school architecture, teacher team work, parental involvement, flexible forms of school organisation, effective teacher education, a different mentality towards teaching and schooling and so on and so forth – will bring about what is desired. But nothing can be changed at once and fully in a country of 80 million people; innovation takes time and is an enduring process. Perhaps what can and what should be learned is patience and stamina in reform efforts on the one hand, and a critical eye on the organizational framework of schooling and teaching/learning on the other hand.

Heinonen, Porträt Weiterbildung Finnland. This book is published by DIE, Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung, as part of a series of descriptions of *continuing education* in different countries. Its challenge is to describe the fluent and many-faceted field of continuing education in a way that gives an overview. Reading this book led us to the following question: When continuing education is so fluent in Finland, that it has been thoroughly changed three times in 30 years, how come basic education is so much more rigid and stable? Of course, the book cannot answer this question. It does, however, manage to pose questions of general relevance – by describing the phases Finnish continuing education has gone through.

Heinonen places great emphasis on the fact that acceptance into universities should depend on "real" competence of the applicants, not on their "formal qualification". Any adult who feels capable of passing an exam can be given qualifications on the basis of his or her knowledge. We should add that the same principle – real competence goes above formal education – is accepted throughout Scandinavia. In Norway, as an example, adults can be *admitted* to any tertiary education programme on the basis of their real compe-

tence, but all students *graduate* through passing a formal exam. The Bologna process can be seen as a response to this: Higher education is becoming more flexible, more adapted to societal and economic demand.

Historically, the education of adults has met a diversity of needs: One purpose of adults coming together is to pursue a hobby or a purpose they find important, and they want continuing education for that. A second purpose is to equip private enterprises with the manpower qualifications they need in order to change and grow. A third purpose is to help those who are systematically disfavoured with regard to education to achieve qualifications necessary for employment.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the speed of change of labour market demands led to a loss of competence also for people already employed in the labour market. This led to a growth of *in-service training* and to the adoption of demand-side economics in continuing education: Those who could pay could invite suppliers to provide a given competence, and different suppliers would then compete for the order. This change of practice led to a growth of continuing education, and its inherent weaknesses were exposed when times got bad. However, we can state as a positive fact that the complexity of needs of adults has led to a policy of self-initiated, labour market oriented continuing education in Finland, and Heinenen's book illustrates well that today, all advanced nations are faced with challenges comparable to the Finnish challenges.

Two questions are left open after reading the book: (1) If life long learning is a challenge throughout the educational system, why does one keep up, in continuing education, the sharp border between "real" and "formal" competence? And (2) if economic theory (the human capital theory) is used to govern an educational system, how far can demand decide the fate of education? Is the state abandoning its role as mediator between different interests?

Hautamäki et al., PISA 2006 Finland. This book was written by many of the researchers who run PISA in Finland. It is a credit to them that the book is interesting as well in the quality of its analyses as in its scope. Even as a post factum explanation, the book as a whole retains a sober and analytical insider perspective.

The book can be read as the definitive Finnish contribution to understand and explain the superior performance of the Finns in PISA from 2000 through 2006. In ten chapters the authors provide information on this success story. The first four of them are devoted to the description of the PISA 2006 results and the development of Finnish educational reforms. After that, science, mathematical and reading literacy are investigated one by one and the PISA results are related to curriculum issues, teacher competences/teacher education and teaching methods, and a summary is given in each case. Chapters 9 and 10 can be understood as a general summary of the findings.

So what are the explanations for success? Many answers are pondered in chapters 5, 6 and 7, and one asset of the book is that it shows that there is no easy solution. Aspects discussed range from a homogeneous culture that appreciates hard work, sharp selection procedures for the high quality teacher education (10% of those wanting to become a teacher are accepted) to special support for lower-achieving pupils, high standards or comprehensive school pedagogy, etc. It seems to us that the book participates in the

search for explanations rather than to limit the discussion by providing empirical support for or against those hypothetical causes.

Two explanations are ruled out, though: money and progressive teaching methods. Finland spends an average amount of money on education while reaching superior results (p. 21). Teaching methods seem to be rather traditional; teachers believe in their traditional role and pupils accept that (p. 104 f.). The authors point to two factors in particular. Firstly how the governance of schools is organised – devolved from a firmly organised system with a high degree of central control to a decentralised system with a high degree of professional control. Also, the Finnish curricula in math, reading and science are considered to be in line with what PISA is asking for, and that this has been so since the 1980's: "In sum, we have presented a narrative which stresses that the PISA framework and the whole educational setting would show a goodness of fit" (p. 204).

2 Discussion

Matthias Trautmann: Let me start with a question which, in a sense, sums up all four of our reviews: A wide range of causes have been brought up to explain the Nordic success in education: organizational structures, teaching practices and resources (Kultur der individuellen Förderung), mindset of teachers and people in general, social homogeneity, teacher quality, a commonly accepted egalitarian policy, et cetera. What can the Germans learn from the Nordic countries?

Gjert Langfeldt: In my mind only Germans can answer your question. But I would like to stress, once again, that for Germans looking towards Scandinavia maybe a good starting point would be to look at your own heritage, your own culture and to assess how you make education today influence your society.

Matthias Trautmann: In the German media, there have recently been reports about educational downward trends in Sweden and Norway. Is Finland an exception inside Scandinavia?

Gjert Langfeldt: One must here discern between media reports and actual facts. The media story has had this angle, not least in Sweden. The real story is that Scandinavian schools – Finland apart – have always performed rather mediocre, generally on the level of other advanced nations, and by and large I believe that still holds true. And yes, Finland is an exception, as much a mystery to the rest of Scandinavia as to themselves.

Matthias Trautmann: What are the problems discussed by educational experts in Scandinavia at the moment, what are the 'hot potatoes'?

Gjert Langfeldt: Now here you're inviting me to start a discussion that could fill a whole journal! I guess the answer would vary, dependent on whom you ask. From my perspective, it seems that a current trend running through Scandinavia is the implementation of accountability-based policies, but these questions depend on the culture and the traditions of the different countries. From a Norwegian point of view, I see no exception to the utili-

tarian ideals of increased competitiveness and basic competencies anywhere. But let me ask you back: Isn't that the German story also?

Matthias Trautmann: You are right. This leads to the conclusion that we should be more conscious of the fact that educational policies are shaped at a crossroads: International influences meet with national heritage, ideas from abroad amalgamate with national traditions. Ironically, this could mean them – the Nordic countries – becoming more like us – and not vice versa.

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Endnote

- 1 Quite similar in scope and depth: Matthies, A.-L., & Skiera, E. (Hrsg.) (2009): Das Bildungswesen in Finnland. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, with the somewhat odd conclusion that Finland cannot be a role model for Germany, but that German politicians should take a closer look at what makes the Finns successful in terms of education (p. 279 f.).